Testimony for
U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

March 13, 2000
Prepared by Mary Corso, Washington State Fire Marshal

Chair Gorton, Senator Murray, and Committee Members:

My name is Mary Corso. I am the Director of the Washington State Patrol Fire Protection Bureau - State Fire Marshal. I am pleased to have the opportunity to address the Senate Commerce Science and Transportation Committee regarding this very important issue related to pipeline safety and the protection of citizens, the first responder community (law enforcement, fire and EMS), and the environment.

I hale originally from the state of Minnesota, where I served for 22 years in the fire service, 15 years of which I served as a firefighter; the remainder in state service with both the Minnesota State Fire Marshal's office; and, most recently, as the Washington State Fire Marshal. Twice, I have seen firsthand the effects of a pipeline incident: first, in 1986 in Minnesota where a pipeline incident was responsible for three deaths in a residential neighborhood where people attempting to flee the dangers were consumed by an explosion and a fire ball, leaving no place to escape. Secondly, and most recently, in Bellingham where a pipeline broke, allowing hundreds of thousands of gallons of gasoline to flow into a waterway, creating a significant threat to life safety, property, and the environment. Unfortunately in this tragic event, three more lives were lost. Three families, an entire community, and the state of Washington bear the grief of this preventable incident.

I am a strong advocate of prevention and preparedness, as I have devoted the past 11 years of my career to protecting life and property through enforcement, engineering, education, and response activities. Protecting people where they live, work, and play takes a holistic approach. It takes passive protection, comprised of safeguards, the majority of which we don't see, but exist silently in the background to protect us. Safeguards such as cathodic protection, monitoring devices and periodic testing. These passive protections need constant vigilance, continuous maintenance, and technical operators to ensure the integrity of the pipeline.

While you have, and will hear significant testimony on these issues, I will focus my remarks on the response, or active protection that is so critical and vital to protecting our communities.

We are not opposed to pipelines in the state of Washington. In fact, we realize that these pipelines may be the safest way for conveyance of liquid and gas fuels. While it has been repeated numerous times, there are not significant numbers of events involving flammable liquids and natural gases, compared to the volume of product that is delivered throughout the state each day. However, such operations from a response perspective, are viewed as low frequency, high risk, and have the capability of causing a catastrophic event if a failure occurs.

Those who risk their lives in service of their community are really community problem solvers. Each time the alarm sounds or the radio crackles another problem must be solved. This is what we do. There are no second thoughts, no hesitations, just a natural automatic response to a need in our community.

In the state of Washington each year the first responders (law enforcement, fire and EMS) answer over 700,000 calls for help. These include fires, emergency medical incidents, hazardous conditions; law enforcement related activities and a plethora of other emergencies related to public safety. These are the everyday events that we take care of almost automatically - instinctively, if you will. Our practice and experience comes from these incidents because of their frequency. We concentrate our training, equipment, and planning on these activities, as they are what our public expects in terms of protection every day.

On the other hand, a hazardous materials incident due to spills or leaks of flammable liquids and/or the release of natural gas are an infrequent event. Therefore, the necessary training and equipment may not always be current or available. It is very difficult at best for many public safety agencies to provide the necessary training and equipment for this very reason.

It is for this very reason I am here to talk to you today. Funding, training, and the necessary equipment to respond to these infrequent incidents are vital to our State's and the Nation's first responders who are called upon to protect life, property, and the environment. The needs of the first response

community are significant; they provide for our ability to maintain the peace, protect the public from fire, and answer the needs for emergency medical services - all vital parts of a safe community.

To complicate matters, our State's fire service is comprised primarily of volunteers, making up 71% of the emergency response community. Of the 650 fire departments in the state, 580 serve populations of 20,000 or less, with vast differences in the capabilities within each community. It was fortunate that the city of Bellingham had a hazmat response team that was capable of responding to the event that took place on June 10, 1999. Unfortunately, that would not have been the case in many other areas along the pipeline.

The major difficulties facing local first responders are:

- Fire departments are under-funded to deal with hazardous materials; they have significant problems covering the high cost of purchase and maintenance of necessary equipment for a hazardous materials response.
- Greater assistance is needed from the state and federal level to support local first responder training and equipment needs.
- The state needs a greater regional response capacity for hazardous material teams along the pipeline – with dedicated funding – to coordinate training equipment and supplies. In Washington State there are 24 publicly funded hazardous material teams, 12 of which are specialized teams. All face serious problems in keeping their staff trained and prepared.

As a member of Governor Locke's Fuel Accident Prevention and Response Team task force, we identified specific recommendations to assist the local first responders. These recommendations directed the State Fire Marshal to:

- Evaluate preparedness of local first responders in communities housing fuel transmission lines.
- In consultation with the Military Department's Emergency Management Division, the Department of Ecology, and local agencies, the Fire Marshal should conduct a needs assessment of local first responders' readiness and equipment needs particularly relevant to fuel transmission pipelines. This should include consideration of the costs and benefits of meeting identified needs.
- Establish a temporary position to develop training programs for local first responders – police, fire, and emergency medical service staff and

volunteers – to deal with pipeline accidents. This person should coordinate with pipeline operators to identify their role in providing the training and to identify the timetable and costs for providing this training to first responders in communities housing transmission pipelines. The program should also address community education and response, including support materials and handouts.

- Evaluate the need for a training program to enhance regional incident management teams to assist local responders in managing fuel pipeline accidents.
- To amend the State Fire Protection Statute (RCW 48.48) to direct the State Fire Marshal to require that local first responders are immediately notified by pipeline operators of any leak or spill, and to;
- Consult with other agencies to identify the need for and legislative means of achieving consistent application of the National Interagency Incident Management System (NIIMS).

It is important that those who may be called upon in a pipeline incident are able to communicate with each other and operate under a common set of guidelines, terminology and structure. Additionally, critical to communications is the need for sufficient dedicated radio spectrums identified for public safety agencies to utilize. These systems must be interoperable and provide a system where all responders are able to talk to each other on the scene. This includes first responders, emergency managers, and the pipeline companies. Standardization, planning and preparation by all players to prepare for an incident are critical and essential to a safe and positive outcome.

The Governor's Fuel Accident Prevention and Response Team recommendations and Governor Locke's support for pipeline safety in the State of Washington needs to be emulated at the federal level to support the protection of our public, our Nation and our environment.

In conclusion, I urge the committee to support the "Pipeline Safety Act of 2000", thereby encouraging these same recommendations you have heard today, at the federal level, to ensure prevention of future incidents and to guarantee that our nation's first responders are prepared and ready when needed.

Thank you.